Introduction

Conserving and Extracting Nature: Environmental Politics and Livelihoods in the New "Middle Grounds" of Amazonia

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Resumen

Tanto como los pueblos de la Amazonía son conocidos en antropología por haber desafiado ideas modernistas de "la naturaleza," industrias extractivas y varios proyectos de desarrollo los colocan al frente de conflictos acerca del medio ambiente. En 1995, Conklin y Graham identificaron que estas interfazes son cada vez mas translocales, provocando a describir un emergente "middle ground" que ubica los pueblos indígenas de la Amazonía y los ambientalistas occidentales como aliados naturales. Reconociendo veinticinco años de la *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* y del artículo seminal de Conklin y Graham, este "jubilee special issue" reconsidera el concepto "middle ground" en el contexto de nuevos y emergentes relaciones en la Amazonía contemporánea. Al conceptualizer los "new middle grounds" de conservación y economias extractivas, investigamos los procesos de acomodación, coloboración, oposición, y posible dominación basadas en perspectivas y prácticas locales. De esta manera nos proponemos extender discusiones de las diferencias radicales en la Amazonía para reconocer también las maneras complejas en que las experiencias indígenas están profundamente integradas en la cultura y política latinoamericana. [políticas ambientales, economías extractivas, middle ground, conservación, base de sustento, Amazonia]

Abstract

While Amazonian people are well known in anthropology for challenging modernist ideas of "nature," extractive industries and development projects have placed them at

The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology, Vol. 0, No. 0, pp. 1–12. ISSN 1935-4932, online ISSN 1935-4940. DOI: 10.1111/jlca.12490

the forefront of conflicts around the environment. In 1995 Beth Conklin and Laura Graham identified these interfaces as increasingly translocal, leading them to describe an emerging "middle ground" that situates indigenous Amazonian people and Western environmentalists as natural allies. In recognizing twenty-five years of the *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* and Conklin and Graham's seminal article, this Jubilee special issue revisits the middle ground concept in terms of intensifying interface relationships in Amazonia. In conceptualizing the "new middle grounds" of conservation and extractive economies, we explore processes of accommodation, partnership, contestation, and potential domination that are grounded in local perspectives and practices. In this way we aim to extend the focus on radical difference in arguments about Amazonia to recognize the complex ways in which indigenous experience is also deeply embedded in Latin American culture and politics. [environmental politics, extractive economies, middle ground, conservation, livelihoods, Amazonia]

In recent years Amazonianist scholarship has become well-known for descriptions of indigenous cosmologies and forms of sociality that depart from conventional Western understandings of "nature" as a domain distinct from society (Descola 1994, 2013; Viveiros de Castro 1998). With the expansion of extractive industries operating on indigenous lands and development projects focused on conservation, Amazonian peoples are also increasingly part of contemporary environmental debates that often exceed national boundaries. Their engagement reflects longstanding cosmopolitical conflicts between neo-liberal extractivist agendas and indigenous ideas of the land and its beings as having agency and value beyond mere natural resources (de la Cadena 2010), as well as relationships with nonindigenous people and myriad outsiders who inhabit and traverse the forests, towns, and cities of Amazonia and beyond. Since the 1980s these interfaces have become increasingly translocal and global in scope, leading Beth Conklin and Laura Graham (1995) to describe an emerging "middle ground" in which indigenous Amazonian people and Western environmentalists were situated as natural allies in environmental conservation. In analyzing the political consequences and fragility of this symbolic alliance, often based on misunderstandings and enduring stereotypes about Amazonian people as natural conservationists, Conklin and Graham's approach has framed many studies of such interfaces in Amazonia since it was published in 1995. Now, twenty-five years after its publication, the contributions to this Jubilee special issue consider how the middle grounds of 21st century Amazonia highlight not just an increasing presence of Amazonian people in environmental politics, but also how their hopes, desires and livelihoods are increasingly tied to relationships and practices that constitute conservation and extraction.

Research articles published in the *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* discussing interethnic relations (Ball 2012; Virtanen 2009), interactions with the state (Nahum-Claudel 2016; Penfield 2016; Shulist 2016; Viatori 2007), ecotourism (Hutchins 2007), environmental advocacy (Cepek 2008; Davidov 2013; Li 2016), and indigenous urbanization (Alexiades and Peluso 2015) have all expanded our understanding of the problematic ways that externally produced ideas and images of indigenous "authenticity" affect the lives of Amazonian peoples. The increasing diversity and intensity of these interfaces point to the continuing prevalence of the symbolic politics described by Conklin and Graham, in which imaginaries of Amazonia and its indigenous peoples often form the basis for political action—to the potential benefit or detriment of communities, depending on how they conform to such imaginaries (Conklin 1997).

However, for many Amazonian peoples such a middle ground also involves personal and economic relationships that are central to their everyday lives. Michael Cepek (2008) shows how Cofán interests in conservation and conservation-based relations in Amazonian Ecuador remain socioculturally grounded and "materially productive of Cofán being" (199). Despite sharing rhetoric with global environmentalism and meeting some outsiders' expectations, in this case Cofán notions of identity shape local decisions to commit to conservation practices and seek legal recognition. In a similar way, Li's (2016) study of antimining activism in Andean Peru shows how the protection of water resources was more than just an instrumental appeal to draw international support. In addition to connecting local politics to global environmentalism, water physically connected communities and mobilized people who share waterways against a large-scale mine degrading their water resources.

By contrast, Ball demonstrates how, in the Xingu Indigenous Park in Brazil, Wauja attempts to continue social relatedness by making demands to NGO and government officials are interpreted as evidence of greed and the corruption of indigenous forms of exchange (2012, 425). In that context, as indigenous Amazonian peoples interact in development projects according to their own cultural expectations of exchange, their counterparts perceive demand-making as an indication of cultural "loss" (429), potentially undermining the "middle ground" because nonindigenous narratives of loss hold more power than indigenous perspectives. Cepek, Li, and Ball illustrate the complexity of the middle ground in practice: though embedded in global symbolic processes, indigenous peoples do not simply conform to or deviate from images and imaginaries. In all of these contexts, interpretative processes, translations, and wider imaginaries of desire and temporality are closely connected to the political and economic processes in which contemporary livelihoods are embedded.

In conceptualizing the "new middle grounds" of conservation and extractive economies in Amazonia, the articles in this special issue explore processes

of accommodation, partnership, contestation, and potential domination that are grounded in local perspectives and practices. These include contexts where Amazonian peoples interact with, work for or against, and interpret the actions of governments, corporations, and nongovernmental organizations with key stakes in environmental politics. In this way, we aim to extend the focus on radical difference in arguments about indigenous Amazonian philosophies and cosmopolitics to recognize the complex ways in which indigenous experience is also deeply embedded in relationships with non-indigenous people, state institutions, and changing political agendas in the countries where they live. But locating Amazonian peoples in national and transnational contexts does not foreclose the specificity of indigenous and other Amazonian people's lifeways, nor their ways of challenging prevailing eco-political agendas. On the contrary, we ask: What does it mean to situate different modes of thought and engagement with the land in emerging Latin American political economies and ecologies? How do discourses and practices of environmental conservation and resource extraction empower or curtail the livelihoods of Amazonian peoples?

To address these questions, we revisit the middle ground concept and the "common, mutually comprehensible world" (Conklin and Graham 1995; cf. White 1991) that emerged around Amazonian environmentalism by examining current practices of conservation and extractive economy. The articles in this special issue pay particular attention to local practices and ideas about current and future livelihoods that shape accommodations and contestations in the new middle grounds of Amazonian environmental politics. In exploring these emerging interfaces ethnographically, we look to extend Conklin and Graham's original focus on the symbolic politics of environmentalism to the diverse personal relationships and economic practices that shape everyday life in Amazonia today.

From Symbolic Politics to the New Middle Grounds

Conklin and Graham's (1995) identification of the shifting middle ground in early Amazonian eco-politics has provided a key frame for understanding the complex challenges indigenous peoples face in the contemporary world. The ideological premise of this Amazonian middle ground is that indigenous people and Western environmentalists share a common eco-political agenda to conserve "nature." Conklin and Graham emphasized key differences between indigenous and Western interests, while also recognizing the power relations in which such a symbolic alliance between Amazonian people and global environmentalism is embedded. That is, these relations aren't just based on misunderstandings and often conflicting goals, but also enduring colonial stereotypes about indigenous people being closer to "nature."

Such imaginaries, whether based on ideas of the "ecologically noble savage" (Redford 1991) or "wild" Amazonian warriors (High 2015a), continue to frame relations between indigenous people and others in Amazonia. We see this clearly in the ways indigenous leaders interact with industry and state institutions (Brown 1993; Graham 2002; High 2007; Sawyer 2004), conservation practices (Cepek 2012; Oakley 2019; Zanotti 2014), engagements with NGOs (Ball 2012; McCallum 1997; Mentore 2017), and public performances of indigenous "culture" at urban folklore festivals (High 2015a; Wroblewski 2019). Whether construed as an obstacle to state development, an emblem of national pride, or an icon of global environmental conservation, there is little doubt that the symbolism attached to indigenous Amazonian people continues to inform their relations with various outsiders. Such imagery figures in gendered and generational relationships within and between indigenous groups themselves (High 2009, 2010), where they take on meanings that are not always easily recognizable to foreign audiences (Graham 2005; Oakdale 2004).

But the middle ground today is also much more than this. Increasingly, it seems, the relationships that constitute the new middle grounds are more tangible than Body Shop advertisements for rainforest products, more personal than distant board meetings attended by an indigenous leader, and more part of everyday life than visits from celebrities who endorse the symbolic alliances that Conklin and Graham described twenty-five years ago. Alongside a politics of recognition that demands specific images of Amazonian people are actual human beings concerned with finding paid employment and making a living in unpredictable and often dangerous economies. Many indigenous Amazonian people today are more concerned with supporting their families, building homes, accessing medicine, and seeing their children attend school than they are with being "authentically" indigenous people—even as their basic rights to land may depend on such recognition. Just as they entered the eco-Indian middle ground from a precarious position relative to Western environmentalists, indigenous Amazonian people tend to enter the labor market, where this is possible, from a relatively marginal position. Despite the discrimination they face in these contexts, and despite the tendency in anthropology to insist on indigenous agency in these encounters, earning cash income through relatively low-paid wage labor is an integral part of Amazonian lived worlds.

In different locations this involves informal mining, logging, oil extraction, conservation work with NGOs, or teaching in local schools, among other things. This work, which is often temporary or sporadic, in many cases complements traditional gardening, collecting, and hunting economies. In this way indigenous people are becoming part of a broader pattern of mobility and circulation between rural and urban areas of Amazonia, where they combine multiple forms of consumption and knowledge (Padoch et al. 2008; Peluso 2015). As Lucy Miller (this issue)

demonstrates for young *ribeirinhos* in Brazil, spending time in nearby towns and desiring access to new media, technology, and services does not equate with devaluing rural communities, even as it challenges a "traditionality" discourse. Working for and with money involves key relationships with nonindigenous people—whether mestizo laborers, American or European representatives of environmental NGOs, government officials, and other agents of state and industry. As part of indigenous livelihoods, these interfaces should move us to think about the changing constitution of Amazonia's new middle grounds. These increasingly personal and enduring interfaces do not just evoke social and ecological issues of urgent concern in global politics. As Elliott Oakley (this issue) shows for an indigenous protected area in Guyana, Amazonian people engage these issues as integral to their livelihoods, in this case valuing conservation because it enables Waiwai people to make claims on their environmentalist partners that exceed conservation management. Here we use the term *livelihoods* not strictly to imply questions of material survival or basic necessity but also material desires and aspirations to mobility and translocal relationships that are part and parcel of the dynamics of life in Amazonia today.

Many of these interfaces and the relationships they entail, whether constituted through work, exchange, or political solidarity, are indicative of the exploitative economies and misunderstandings that Conklin and Graham recognized as making the eco-Indian middle ground so fragile and contradictory to begin with. They include people who have been involved in extractive economies for decades, as well as others employed as park rangers in ecological conservation, and myriad other contexts of negotiation and accommodation that continue to reveal divergent interests, ontological commitments, and political agendas. Latin American governments that depend on extractive economies, alongside global environmental concerns about them, both contribute to making indigeneity a tool of governance (Postero 2013) and actualize indigenous life projects as alternative visions for the future (Blaser 2004; Ødegaard and Rivera Andía 2019). While the often highly personal interface contexts highlighted in this special issue extend beyond the symbolic politics that characterized the eco-Indian middle ground of the 1980s and 1990s, they continue to resonate with the historian White's (1991) original formulation of the middle ground.

Alterity at the Interface of Environmental Politics

Writing about frontier relationships in the Great Lakes region of North America from the 17th to 19th centuries, White described the "middle ground" as a pragmatic process of accommodation and exchange through which Indians and whites created a mutually comprehensible world. Creative and expedient misunderstandings on both sides are central to this middle ground: "People try to persuade others who are different from themselves by appealing to what they perceive to be the

values and the practices of those others. They often misinterpret and distort both the values and practices of those they deal with, but from these misunderstandings arise new meanings and through them new practices" (White 1991, x).

Part of what was provocative in this conceptualization was the idea that a middle ground does not principally involve the acculturation of indigenous peoples or relations of domination but pragmatic innovations that emerge from mutual misconceptions. White argued that this space in fact depends on a "rough balance of power," where each party desires or needs what the other possesses (2006, 10). This move to explore colonial and republican Indian-white relations beyond questions of absolute power has parallels with the emphasis on indigenous agency in recent decades of Amazonian ethnography (High 2015b). Like White's history of the Great Lakes region, many of the best Amazonian ethnographies in recent decades have challenged the idea that such interfaces are inevitably characterized by the acculturation of indigenous peoples. So we have enduring Amazonian social philosophies in which "predation" and "other-becoming" elude Western ideas of identity and culture (Fausto 2001; Vilaça 2010; Viveiros de Castro 1992, 2011), perspectival ontologies that confound conventional modernist categories of nature and culture (Viveiros de Castro 1998), and indigenous myths and histories that challenge or even dismiss Western understandings of colonialism and historicity (Blaser 2013; Gow 1991, 2001). Indigenous strategies to navigate exploitative or dangerous conditions also produce new meanings, but can require relative power parity. Laura Mentore (this issue) demonstrates this in her description of an indigenous community sharing a certain precarity with itinerant gold miners operating on their lands, where they see feeding the miners "real foods" as transforming the moral deficiencies associated with white bodies. Examples like these illustrate the innovative qualities of indigenous cosmologies and lifeways previously written off as bound for extinction (Albert and Ramos 2000).

One strength of this work has been in recognizing indigenous Amazonian ontologies that fundamentally challenge modernist categories of "nature" and "culture" that have dominated state policies and environmental politics in South America (de la Cadena 2010; Escobar 1999). Anthropologists have extended this approach to describe various interface contexts in conservation and environmental politics as cosmopolitical conflicts. These conflicts are understood to be borne not out of mere "cultural" differences, but different "worlds" or assumptions about what exists. Marisol de la Cadena (2010), for example, describes Andean earth beings as cosmopolitical agents that exceed modernist divisions between nature and humanity, while Mario Blaser offers the concept of political ontology to describe "the dynamics through which different ways of worlding sustain themselves even as they interact, interfere, and mingle with each other" (2013, 552). Proponents of political ontology join Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in problematizing "culture" as an inadequate interpretive lens for recognizing difference in indigenous South

America. While Blaser makes clear that such "worldings" are not concerned with specific groups of people but instead their performance or enactment, ontological approaches most often convey incommensurable differences—or different ways of differentiating—that separate indigenous Amazonian and modernist modes of thought.

This focus on alterity is in certain ways at odds with the idea of an Amazonian middle ground. Reflecting on the reception of his book, *The Middle Ground* (1991), fifteen years after its publication, White's warning about the "purifying" and "othering" associations of "culture" has certain parallels with critiques of ontological difference: "There is, I think, a culturalist disease of the late 20th and early 21st centuries that amounts to a fascination with purity and otherness to which I intended *The Middle Ground* to be a partial antidote. The book assumes that people are not necessarily stupid, simple or parochial; contact situations created not only violence, xenophobia, and … a 'failure to communicate,' but also new cultural formations and new understandings" (White 2006, 13).

Where ontological approaches highlight irreconcilable differences between indigenous and other "worlds," and have been criticized for reifying such differences, White's middle ground focused instead on mutual misunderstandings as a source of novelty. And yet, both White and proponents of radical alterity in Amazonia share a focus on the misunderstandings that characterize interfaces between "Indian" and "Western" people. In theorizing a specifically "Amerindian" way of conceiving difference, Viveiros de Castro argues that Amazonian translations are "controlled equivocations" concerned not with finding different ways of representing the same world but with recognizing the "difference concealed within equivocal "homonyms" between our language and that of other species, since we and they are never talking about the same things" (2004, 7). Misunderstandings and misrecognitions emerge in cases of "uncontrolled equivocation" (Viveiros de Castro 2004) that do not recognize the enactment of multiple worlds (Kelly 2011). Whereas indigenous Amazonian people tend to be aware of multiple systems of reference, or multiple worlds, their counterparts often do not. As High (this issue) demonstrates in his analysis of "Waorani land" (*wao öme*), moving between and translating different ways of conceiving difference are increasingly important to indigenous lived worlds, even as national discourses of "nature" and "culture" mischaracterize what is at stake for Amazonian people.

Recognition of distinct modes of indigenous thought and their resilience in the face of colonial and neocolonial transformations has contributed substantially to our appreciation of the agency of indigenous people in asserting their own histories (Fausto and Heckenberger 2007; Gow 2001). Indigenous practices and social imaginations have been embedded in and subjected to wider political and economic transformations in Latin America for centuries (Fisher 2000; High 2015a). Our intention in this special issue is to analyze the complex interfaces between

distinct yet historically entwined peoples by bringing together Amazonianist debates about cosmopolitics and "nature" with specific political and economic processes in twenty-first century Latin America. We build on recent work recognizing the increasing power of ontological differences in national politics (Blaser 2009, 2013; de la Cadena 2010; Ødegaard and Rivera Andía 2019). Yet we argue that taking such differences seriously also requires recognizing how, in new and emerging middle grounds, indigenous understandings cannot be entirely extricated from wider Latin American ideas. Nor can we assume that they imply certainty (Graeber 2015) or a unified consensus across the groups we study (Cepek 2016).

Livelihoods in the Middle Grounds

The articles in this special issue demonstrate how Amazonian practices grounded in indigenous cosmologies are not easily differentiated from various engagements with market economies and nation states. Our focus on the multiple ways in which Amazonian peoples today engage with conservation and extraction complicates the idea that "indigenous life-making projects" necessarily involve mobilization against extractivism or "a renewed critique of capitalism" (Ødegaard and Rivera Andía 2019, 24). Gordon Ulmer (this issue), for example, illustrates the range of exchanges and syncretic ritual practices through which migrant gold miners in Peru's Madre de Dios region contend with the dangerous human and nonhuman forces of "la Tierra" that mediate access to gold. What it means to "live well" (Overing and Passes 2000) in Amazonia today, we suggest, includes strategies for obtaining material needs and relating to wider networks of people and places in Latin America and beyond. As Laura Zanotti (2016, 10) argues, Amazonian people pursue livelihoods in ways that "are not blind to political and economic realities of a neodevelopmentalist and neoextractivist state." We thus ask, how are different systems of reference intertwined with urgent political, economic, and social stakes? How do Amazonian people understand debates about the environment and their increasing presence as practitioners of conservation, governance, and industry? Of particular interest to each author in this special issue is not just whether middle ground sites function or break down—though this discussion is essential to our ethnographic accounts—but the translations, reciprocal (mis)interpretations, and working (mis)understandings through which outsiders, nonindigenous, and indigenous peoples live these relationships (Blaser 2009; Kelly 2011; Mentore 2017; Wagner 1981).

To this end, this special issue illustrates what can be called Amazonian livelihoods. These livelihoods are fundamentally situated in interface contexts, whether between Amazonian communities and external conservation actors (Miller; Oakley, this issue), mining interests (Mentore; Ulmer, this issue), or oil companies (High, this issue). This work demonstrates the necessity to analyze local and

translocal processes in tandem, from challenging the enduring separation between regional studies of highland and lowland South America (Ulmer, this issue) and "rural" versus "urban" places and peoples (Miller, this issue) to understanding indigenous relations to land in connection to wider discourses of conservation and development (High this issue; Oakley, this issue) or power-laden indigenous-white relations through local ideas of feeding and labor (Mentore, this issue). We rely on ethnographic accounts to avoid reifying differences between "our" and "their" worlds, offering the relations and practices of conserving and extracting nature as studies in how Amazonian peoples engage with capitalist economies. They describe not straightforward stories of resistance and alterity but rather "the production of desire" that Steven Rubenstein describes as central to any political ecology of Amazonia (2004, 132). This requires attention to how Amazonian peoples strategically navigate environmental conservation and resource extractivism, which often manifest not as abstract global forces but as, in White's original phrasing, "others who are different from themselves" (1991, x).

With this approach we suggest a productive rapprochement between scholars emphasizing indigenous alterity and those who critique this work as shifting away from the "nitty-gritty of indigenous real life" (Ramos 2012, 482). While the former provide detailed accounts of how cosmological systems shape local interpretations of colonial (Viveiros de Castro 2011), missionary (Vilaça 2016), and state institutions (Kelly 2011), the latter critique the political effects of foregrounding indigenous ontology, whether for effacing poverty (Bessire and Bond 2014) or concealing indigenous political agency in environmentalism (Cepek 2008). We argue that both of these approaches are important and indeed necessary for grappling with the evolving complexity of socioecological debates across Amazonia today. The emergence or erasure of any new middle ground is temporally specific, requiring a relative parity of power that is an anomaly in the ongoing colonial history of domination and exploitation in Amazonia. Anthropologists' deep concerns for the futures of contemporary Amazonian peoples ought not to require choosing between continuities in indigenous cosmology or exploitative political economic conditions, but rather accounts that acknowledge the diverse ways that our interlocutors articulate, evaluate, and envision their livelihoods in relation to national and transnational processes.

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